Teaching Strategies for Twice-Exceptional Students

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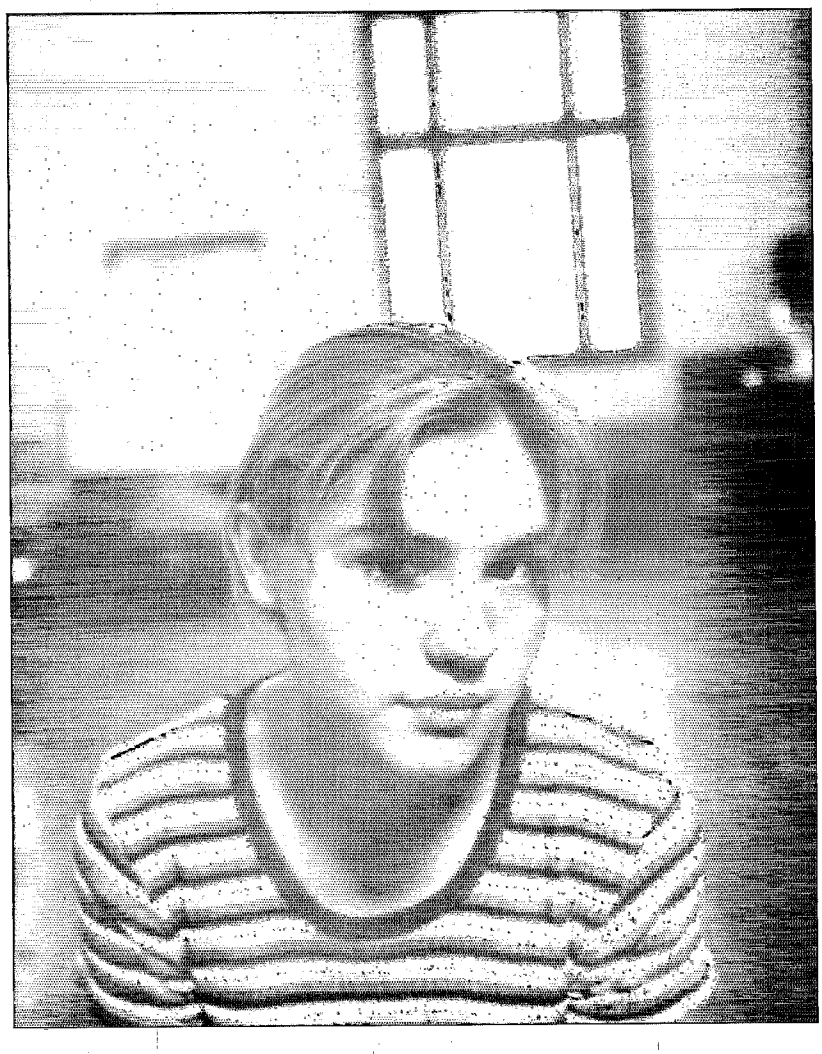

For many years, parents and teachers have been perplexed about youngsters who have dramatic learning strengths in some areas and equally dramatic learning weaknesses in others. These students appear to defy accurate labeling: Are they gifted or learning disabled? Finally, the debate has stopped, and educators are now recognizing these students as "twice-exceptional." Rather than trying to use evidence from their weak learning areas to prove they are not "truly gifted," savvy teachers are now learning how to allow these students to experience the same opportunities available for gifted students when they are learning in their strength areas. When students are learning in their areas of weakness, teachers are learning to provide the same compensation strategies used by other students with learning disabilities. This article offers specific instruction to empower teachers to effectively teach twice-exceptional students.

Can you visualize the well-known Far Side *(Larson, 2000) cartoon that depicts a boy pushing a door with all his might to get into a school for the gifted? The problem is, the door is clearly marked "PULL." Many in my audience laugh when I show this picture. Some nod ruefully, recognizing themselves or a child they know. In gifted education over the years, students like this have caused great frustration for their teachers and parents because their obvious exceptional abilities in some areas of learning seem overshadowed by their painfully apparent weaknesses, particularly in the areas of organizational or social skills and just plain common sense.*

At the workshops I present for teachers, I often hear statements of extreme frustration with students who seem to defy accurate description. In some ways, their clearly exceptional abilities are apparent. But in many other ways, their learning deficiencies seem to make it nearly impossible for learning success to occur, even in their areas of greatest strength, because they often skip important steps as they make intuitive leaps toward answers or problem solutions. Sometimes, these students impress their teachers and peers with highly creative stories and scenarios, but when their teachers ask them to write their great ideas, the students contend, "I can't write!" Teachers are caught between belief and disbelief, as they wonder if the student actually cannot do a task or simply is "too lazy" to exert the required effort. Teachers have often used evidence of the student's learning weaknesses to prove to a parent or administrator that the child is not "truly gifted," by which they usually mean gifted in all learning areas. Sometimes, students' learning difficulties depress their gifted potential into very average performance. Teachers may wonder how the parents of such kids could claim their children are exceptionally capable when their perfectly average performance should satisfy.

When we add to these facts the reality that some gifted students are extremely active and nonconforming, we can predict that many of them have been or will be diagnosed as having an attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or a learning disability (LD), and they probably will not receive services in gifted education during their years in public school (Webb & Latimer, 1993).

Slowly but surely, educators have come to acknowledge the dichotomy of abilities that characterize students we now refer to as *twice exceptional:* youngsters who have clearly exceptional abilities in some areas and weaknesses in others. Sadly, most classroom time and attention is focused on student weaknesses, with little or no attention to their remarkable strengths. Are these kids gifted? Do they have learning disabilities? Yes . . . and yes!

Working together, educators in gifted and special education are discovering ways to create and maintain optimum learning conditions for twice-exceptional students. More important than understanding how each specific learning challenge manifests itself is that educators encourage twice-exceptional students to use proven strategies that will allow them to compensate for their areas of weakness while simultaneously experiencing opportunities gifted students appreciate in their areas of learning strength. Twice-exceptional students cannot improve by simply "trying harder." Their learning challenges often emanate from a series of neurological twists and turns as messages try to make their way to the brain from the original stimulus. By the same token, many students already labeled as having LD do not actually have neurological implications. Such students would better be labeled as "learning strategy disabled" because their academic outcomes can improve dramatically when they learn to use appropriate compensation techniques. This article describes specific teaching and learning methods that teachers and parents can use to facilitate significant learning progress for twice-exceptional students in areas of both strengths and weaknesses.

Teach Them the Way They Learn

While planning and teaching compensation strategies, educators must acknowledge the need for teaching the same concepts in many different ways: If students are not learning the way we teach them, teach them the way they learn. When we keep trying to teach something to a child in a way in which he or she has repeatedly failed, discouragement and self-blame quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If learners assume that their failures to learn are caused by stupidity or laziness, their primary purpose in the classroom is to hide their ineptness from peers and teachers. Clowning and other misbehaviors, they believe, can obfuscate their perceived lack of ability. When they are in the classes of teachers who can "teach them the way they learn," they can begin to gather evidence that learning success is probable when they can use methods that capitalize on their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses.

Beware of creating a situation that Landfried (1989) has designated as "educational enabling." His work documented that our tendency is often to make learning tasks as easy as possible so students can feel successful. However, the more evidence students get that their teachers do not expect them to handle grade-level work, the more convinced these students become that no one believes they can handle more challenging content. Instead of implying there is something wrong with the students themselves because of their repeated failures, we can demonstrate that we will help students try as many

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different methods as necessary until we find the "fit" that allows the students to experience learning success with material that is close to grade-level standards.

Recently, I was in a conversation with a friend whose learning challenges sometimes interfere with his speech fluency. As hesitations, repetitions, backtracking, and loss of memory about what he was trying to say became ever more frustrating, I offered a suggestion. I asked him to straighten his arm, use his hand to trace an imaginary infinity sign lying on its side, and allow his eyes to follow his hand as it traced that sign in large arches that crossed the center of his body. After a few moments of this exercise, he resumed his story with remarkable fluency. The method comes from a program called Brain Gym, which was created by Dennison (1989). It is based on the concept that specific kinesiology exercises can facilitate cross-over between brain hemispheres and improve fluency and competence in learning tasks. It is just one dramatic example of ways in which simple compensation strategies may facilitate learning for persons with learning difficulties, including those who fit the profile of the twice-exceptional learner.

Are these kids gifted? Do they have learning disabilities? Yes . . . and yes!

The rule to follow when teaching twice-exceptional students is simple. When teaching these students in their areas of strength, offer them the same compacting and differentiation opportunities available to other gifted students. When teaching in their areas of challenge, teach them directly whatever strategies they need to increase their learning success. *Never* take time away from their strength areas to create more time to work on their deficiencies.

The first twice-exceptional student I recall having in my class was a fifth grader named Eric. He had serious difficulty with any written task, which was compounded by almost illegible handwriting. His math skills were weak; he had great trouble writing coherent sentences and appeared to be very frustrated when asked to recall skill work he had "mastered" a short time ago. When we started a unit on maps, Eric really shined. He had always been in charge of mapping his family's summer auto trips and could remember in incredible detail the routes of trips they had taken since he was 7 years old. He also had an almost photographic memory of information about national parks and monuments. Eric asked if he could demonstrate what he knew about these subjects in order to be excused from "learning" it all over again. I agreed and simply offered the end of the unit test to anyone who wanted to take it, explaining that anyone who earned an *A* would be allowed to work on extension activities instead of the regular content.

Eric and several other students met the required criteria, but I then faced a serious dilemma. I was sorely tempted to use some of Eric's social studies time to remediate his glaring weaknesses. However, the truth was that he was exceptionally capable in the content his classmates were just beginning to learn. Therefore, I decided that he was as entitled as anyone else to engage in differentiated learning during the length of this map unit. Remediation could wait for the appropriate class period.

From a menu of activities, Eric chose to create a country from papier mâché and was expected to demonstrate the placement in his imaginary country of the same geographic features the class was studying. He was also expected to explain why he placed elements where he did as well as the relationships between elements. The other students did not resent Eric's freedom to work in this manner because everyone in the class had a similar opportunity to take the pretest. Watching Eric work sparked interest from other students to create a country also. Creating group countries became the culminating activity for all students. During their work on this project, Eric became the "create a country consultant." The status he earned from this experience significantly improved classmates' perception of Eric's ability, and he felt good about the experience as well. So remember the rule: Never remediate students' weaknesses until you first teach to their strengths!

Tips for Teachers When Addressing Students' Learning Challenges

The following strategies provide a framework for addressing the specific learning needs of children who are twice exceptional.

1. Teach students to appreciate individual differences. For all students in a class to accept the presence of differentiation opportunities, teachers need to be willing to spend time helping all students understand and appreciate individual differences. This is an area in which I think our schools fall short. Schools support programs of multicultural diversity appreciation yet fail to understand how short-sighted it is to limit teachers' efforts for the benefit of children from other cultures. Why not use the same type of techniques to help students become more accepting of all individual differences?

Take time at the beginning of every school year to help all your students appreciate, respect, and support individual differences in everything from observable physical differences to apparent differences in learning abilities. When teachers can consistently demonstrate that diversity is a positive and desirable condition, students will follow their lead, and acceptance of individual differences becomes the modus operandi. Many students who have committed

violence in schools have a history of being teased mercilessly for their noticeable differences. Efforts to facilitate respect for learning differences should continue throughout the school year and should become a schoolwide initiative. Teachers and schools must enforce policies that simply do not allow teasing, name calling, or other harassment practices that demonstrate rejection of kids for any reason.

This is a very tall order, given the assumption that "kids will be kids." Is it possible that students can learn to be more tolerant instead of so demanding of conformity? I believe it is, in much the same way as U.S. citizens have changed their attitudes about the acceptability of driving while under the influence of addictive substances. Twenty years ago, jokes about drunken behavior were ubiquitous. Now, the humor seems less politically correct than a national effort to save lives that may be lost to drunk drivers on our highways. If a nation can change its culture in a positive way, so can schools. If students could learn to cheer when someone learns something a different way, soon they would become conditioned to celebrate diversity.

I further believe this can be accomplished even without apparent support from parents. Although it is best to have parental support, it is not always possible. The mores of classrooms reflect wide discrepancies compared with what is found in some students' homes. This respect for diversity could simply be one more area in which students understand that "We do things differently at school, and that's the way it is." The only arena in which teachers can have real influence is at school. If teachers believe they must wait for families to communicate only helpful values to their children, they will be waiting a long time in some cases. Let's consider the classroom as the place for these reforms to begin.

2. Be aware that many students who have learning difficulties are global learners who prefer visual and tactile-kinesthetic formats for learning success. Some students with learning problems may have sensory challenges. They may be uncomfortable in absolutely quiet places, prefer soft light to brightly lighted areas, appreciate multiple opportunities for movement, or prefer relaxed postures (Carbo, Dunn, & Dunn, 1986). Teachers should offer these students choices of different work areas. They should be free to choose the place in which they will do their work as long as they follow three simple rules:

- Do not bother anyone while you are working, including the teacher.
- Do not call attention to yourself or the fact you are doing something different than other students.
- Do the work you are supposed to do.

Students who follow these expectations are allowed to choose where they will work. Students who do not follow these guidelines will have their working area chosen by the teacher, one day at a time (Winebrenner, 1996).

3. Always teach content by teaching concepts first and details second. Make sure students see the big picture before they try to learn its pieces. Strategies that are helpful include the Survey and Question strategies from SQ3R (Robinson, 1970), watching a video before and after studying a novel or other unit of work, hearing a story read aloud before reading it individually, and working from graphic organizers that fit on one page so that students can see the entire unit content. All skills should be integrated into meaningful content rather than taught as separate learning activities.

4. Teach students how to set realistic short-term goals and to take credit for reaching those goals, even if they represent only a partial amount of the entire task. This technique is highly effective in helping discouraged learners become positively motivated to put more effort into their work because it makes larger assignments feel more manageable. Both in-class assignments and homework should be designated in terms of the amount of time these students are expected to work rather than as a prescribed number of problems or specific amount of work to be completed. Parents can help by monitoring that the designated time was spent. This is preferable to having students spend several painful hours trying to complete an arbitrary amount of work. When teachers feel frustrated by students who do not do their homework, the issue of whether students *can* do the work must be taken into consideration. This means that teachers must be sure students have learned enough during class time to have the skills to complete their assignments at home. It also means that parents or caretakers need to provide an appropriate place at home to work on school assignments.

5. Teach in a way that ties past learning to new content. In order for students to learn and generalize new skills, they must be able to connect the new learning to something they already know. Many students with learning difficulties prefer making everything visual so they can see the patterns and connections they need to assimilate new learning. Use graphic organizers, charts, graphs, timelines, semantic maps, vocabulary maps, and similar tools that condense words into pictures or graphics. If you lecture, supplement your words with visual organizers as you talk. Stop frequently to check for understanding with group signals and other group response methods rather than simply accepting one or two verbal responses from volunteers as evidence that all students have learned the content.

6. Immerse all the senses in learning activities. Use musical chants, raps, rhymes, or rhythms for students who respond to those methods. Companies that stock teaching and learning aids will often carry such products. For many students, the simple act of singing or chanting the content makes mastery much easier to achieve.

Build movement into learning tasks. Recognize the validity of needing to move as an actual learning style, and observe how movement helps some students learn specific content. Ask students to stand or jump to indicate their responses to questions. Use team games where students can walk to different areas of the room to indicate a response. Allow them to hold squeezeable objects, such as Kush Balls®, that enable them to keep moving their hands. Guard against the impulse to automatically label highly kinesthetic learners as having ADHD.

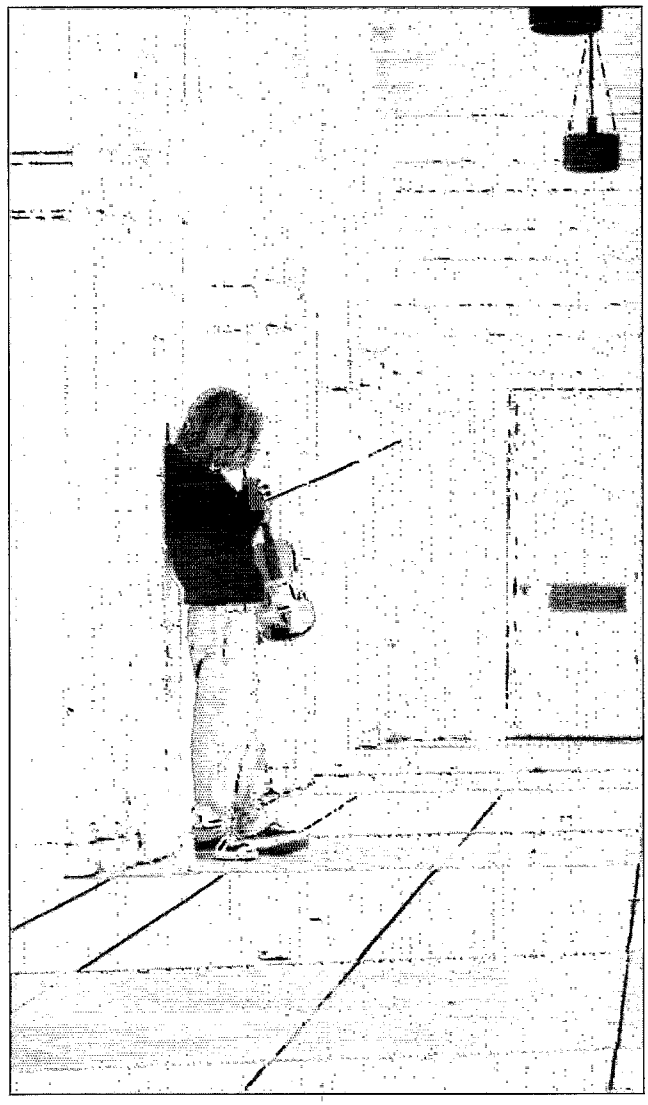
Understand that twice-exceptional students often prefer hands-on and experiential learning situations. Such opportunities meet students' needs to learn from the concrete to the abstract. Actual manipulation of objects often helps these students better understand concepts when they are transferred to more abstract applications within content areas. Include projects, models, and visual representations as assignments because students can often understand concepts better when they are encouraged to "do" rather than to hear or see. Unfortunately, teachers sometimes prevent this type of learning activity because it is thought to be more difficult to manage classroom behavior. The irony is that acceptable behavior is much more likely to occur when students are vitally interested and involved in what they are learning.

Allow struggling readers to listen to the books on tape before the class reads a designated story or novel. Listening to one chapter at a time allows many students to become more active participants in class discussions and activities. An agency called Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (see Resources) has recordings of almost every book used in U.S. classrooms and allows schools or individual families to borrow taped books for a nominal fee. All that is required is a letter from a medical or educational professional indicating that the child has some learning difficulty.

7. Provide specific instruction in organizational techniques. Provide color-coded notebooks by subject areas and two sets of texts, one that can be kept at home. Teach students to organize their lockers, desks, and supplies. Help students learn to use an assignment notebook or personal desk assistant to keep track of assignments and long-term projects. Use any other methods that work.

8. Find and use any available technology that will improve a student's productivity. Students are not "cheating" by using calculators, tape recorders, word processors, and spell-check programs if not using such aids would contribute to the continuation of the learning weaknesses. These aids help students concentrate on conceptual content instead of forcing them to focus on less important details such as spelling. In addition, teaching students to use technology provides them with a useful life skill.

9. Allow students to take tests in separate, supervised environments so they can either read the test aloud to themselves or have someone else read it to them. Some students have difficulty concentrating on tests when typical classroom noise occurs. A quiet place allows a student to focus. Furthermore, listening to a voice read the questions aloud helps the student better understand the questions.



Tips for Teachers to Accommodate Gifted Abilities in Students Who Are Twice Exceptional

It is often difficult for teachers to understand that students with learning difficulties might also be gifted in some areas of learning. However, if we remember that the essential definition of twice exceptional is exactly that, we can see such learners from a different perspective. Allow these students to experience the same compacting and differentiation opportunities available to other students. Offer pretests to allow them to document previous mastery of

upcoming content. Allow opportunities for students to move through new content at a faster pace and to use allocated worktime on projects related to topics in which they have a particular interest (Winebrenner, 2000).

Compacting is the process of allowing highly capable students to demonstrate their previous mastery of some of the required curriculum. Compacting also occurs when students are allowed to demonstrate that they need less time than their peers to learn new material (Renzulli, 1977). When the evidence of the need for compacting is present, differentiation follows. Thus, when students demonstrate that the general curriculum or pacing does not provide an appropriate challenge, they can gain access to more challenging topics or activities. Gifted students deserve these opportunities, not simply because they are gifted but because all students are entitled to experience the promises of the school's mission statement. If it promises that students are supposed to be able to achieve learning to the highest levels of their potential, gifted students must be allowed access to activities that are personally challenging. If giftedness implies a learning ability that exceeds expectations for same-age peers, it is natural to understand the need for differentiated curriculum.

Teachers often cannot be convinced of the real need for differentiation until they know the value of challenging all students to move into uncharted waters. Gifted students often do not come close to their learning potential, especially when they are "given" high grades for work they know took little to no effort. Although most teachers believe that all students should have their self-esteem needs met as part of their learning experience, few realize that self-esteem actually is enhanced when success is attained through tasks an individual considers challenging (Rimm, 1986). Development of high self-esteem requires that students be allowed to challenge themselves in an environment in which their mistakes and struggles, as well as their successes, will be allowed and appreciated.

The most serious challenge is that the giftedness will go unnoticed and unaccommodated in favor of attending to learning deficits.

When students receive high grades and other acknowledgements for assignments or projects they know required little or no effort, their self-confidence may be undermined. These students may learn to always find the easiest way out or creatively postpone their exposure to challenges. Others students fear that if they try something challenging and do not instantly master content with little or no effort, others might conclude that they are not really very smart after all.

To assume that gifted students are learning by virtue of the fact that they demonstrate minimum standards on state assessments is ludicrous. When appropriate compacting and differentiation opportunities are regularly available, gifted students can spend considerable class time working on differentiated activities while their classmates are preparing for these high-stakes assessments.

Compacting and differentiation efforts should revolve around the following guidelines. Many children who are twice exceptional have very uneven standardized test scores. This profile paints an accurate picture of the very definition of this condition—strong highs and significant lows. Often, the learning disability depresses the gifted ability so the child scores in the average range.

All learning activities, including thematic, interdisciplinary units, should have preassessment opportunities available for students who volunteer to demonstrate prior knowledge and mastery of concepts, ideas, and skills. Whatever method has been planned for assessing student progress during or at the end of a particular unit of study is the same method that can be used for the preassessment.

Whether the preassessment takes the form of a written test, measuring student response as the class brainstorms all they know about an upcoming topic, or performance on a designated task, any student who chooses to participate in the designated task should be encouraged to do so. When the preassessment tasks are available to all who think they could demonstrate the required degree of mastery, there should be little resentment from students who are unable to do so, particularly if the "regular" activities are interesting and challenging.

Students who qualify for differentiation after the preassessment spend much of their class time working on extension activities, some designed by the teacher and some reflecting student choice. These students are required to pay attention to direct instruction only when the teacher is presenting material the students have not mastered.

In subjects where pretesting is not feasible because the content is new for all students, teachers compact the amount of time students have to spend learning the designated content. Students who can and want to are allowed to work with study guides to learn the designated content at their own pace without actually being required to do the actual activities other students are doing. Their class time is spent instead on becoming resident experts on a topic related to the unit content. When they share what they have learned with the class, the unit content is enriched for everyone. During the duration of the unit, students take the same assessments at the same time as others in the class, which helps the teacher document

that they are learning the required material. When students can do this, they are allowed to continue work on their projects. If the students indicated through the assessments that they are not keeping up with the required content, they must rejoin their classmates for the duration of the unit and do the required activities from that point on.

When students need acceleration of content in addition to or in place of extensions, such as in subjects that are very sequential like reading or math, acceleration opportunities should be made available, even if the student is working below grade level in other subjects. Students might be allowed to work with a group of students from a higher grade for the subject areas in which they are significantly advanced. In rare cases, where a youngster's entire learning level is significantly advanced from that of same-age peers, radical acceleration or double promotion is another option.

Don't worry about the fairness issue. If you are concerned that other students will resent the options available for your gifted students or students with learning challenges, simply allow any students who are interested to participate for a short period of time. When assessments are required at regular intervals, it is easy to identify students who should not continue with the compacting and who need to return to direct instruction. It is also a good idea to allow all class members to choose extension activities from time to time, even though they would spend less time on these activities than time spent by the "resident expert."

Summary

Teaching children who are twice exceptional is very challenging. The most serious challenge is that the giftedness will go unnoticed and unaccommodated in favor of attending to learning deficits. Any efforts teachers can direct toward understanding and teaching the whole child will go a long way toward creating optimum learning conditions for these very interesting and challenging youngsters. Happily, there are many more resources available now than at any time in the past to aid teachers in their quest for making educational plans that will challenge and enrich students' school experiences.

About the Author

Susan Winebrenner, MS, is the author of two books: *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom* and *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom.* She has consulted with school districts in more than 40 states and in several foreign countries, helping teachers learn how to meet the needs of twice-exceptional students in heterogeneous classes. Address: Susan Winebrenner, PO Box 667, San Marcos, CA 92069.

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Resources

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